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The Honorable Joseph H. Boardman
Federal Railroad Administrator

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Introduction

Good afternoon, I am really pleased to join you today. On behalf of Transportation Secretary Mary Peters, I want to thank all of you for your continuing commitment and contributions toward improving the safety and efficiency of the nation's rail system.

Over the past year I have had the opportunity to work closely with AREMA members and its leadership, particularly on the issue of railroad bridge safety. I have seen up close the dedication and professionalism of AREMA members as you seek to develop improved standards for good design, inspection, and maintenance of bridges, tracks and other rail infrastructure. I, and all of us at FRA and DOT, sincerely appreciate and applaud your efforts.

Bridge Safety

However, having standards is one thing. Ensuring that they are effectively put into practice is another. And what I am seeing when it comes to bridge safety greatly concerns me.

There is evidence that some railroads are not fully adhering to AREMA's widely-accepted 'best practices' for bridge inspection and maintenance, or to FRA's policy on railroad bridge safety. This is unacceptable and it must be corrected immediately. Indifference or ambivalence are not sound infrastructure management practices. It can spell danger for your employees, your customers, and the communities you operate in.

That is why FRA is issuing a Safety Advisory tomorrow that strongly recommends that the rail industry strictly conform to AREMA's existing engineering principles and procedures that ensure the structural integrity of the Nation's 100,000 railroad bridges. In the coming weeks and months, FRA will be closely monitoring how railroads respond to this Safety Advisory. The bottom line is railroads can and must do a better job with their bridge safety programs.

The tragic collapse of the I-35 highway bridge in Minneapolis is a stark reminder of the serious responsibility that comes with owning and maintaining transportation infrastructure— and railroads are no exception. Railroads must not… and cannot… take their bridges for granted.

Policymakers, rail employees, rail passengers, and the public at large demand that we all live up to our responsibilities in operating and maintaining a safe rail network. You can count FRA among that crowd.

Many rail bridges were constructed in the 1930s or before, and their advancing age, combined with record rail traffic volumes and loads, demand serious and sustained commitments to improve bridge inspection and maintenance practices. Even in the immediate aftermath of Minneapolis, I have doubts that some railroads truly recognize we are in a new era of public awareness and scrutiny— just as some may still not recognize we are in a new era as far as hazmat shipments are concerned.

In July, I wrote to the AAR and the engineering chiefs of every Class I railroad asking for help in finding ways to increase transparency and accountability in managing bridge safety programs. To date, I have received only one response and that single reply essentially suggests that the status quo is satisfactory and acceptable. I strongly disagree. More of the same is not the answer.

In the past 18 months a bridge collapsed under a train carrying rocket motors for a NASA space shuttle, resulting in six injuries; FRA issued an Emergency Order taking a bridge out of service after a railroad failed to make repairs identified by an FRA inspector; and a major railroad had to scramble to fix underwater bridge support structures for fear of a failure on a significant corridor.

There are other examples as well. On the large railroads we have seen far too many situations where critical items noted in internal bridge inspection reports go unaddressed until a near-failure forces action. Many smaller railroads display an alarming lack of awareness about what they should be doing to maintain their bridges. This is not a matter of 'deferred maintenance.' It goes directly to the need for the leadership of each railroad to implement a robust bridge safety management program. Lives and livelihoods depend on it.

To be sure, some railroads large and small are doing the right thing when it comes to bridge safety, but we must acknowledge that a problem exists. I can assure you that both policymakers and the public will increasingly demand evidence that railroad bridges are safe. A railroad's word that 'all is well' is not sufficient. "Benign neglect," cannot and will not be tolerated; nor are "excuses" a substitute for action.

As President Reagan said, we need to "Trust, but Verify." It is essential that we develop a practical means to verify that railroads are doing what they should be doing. The risk to public safety and to the efficient movement of commerce are simply too high to just do more of the same.

In addition to issuing the new Safety Advisory, I am adding a bridge safety component to the agenda when I have my yearly meetings with the senior management of every Class I railroad. I want to know what your bridge issues are and what you are doing to fix them. And, in June I held what I hope will be the first of many industry-wide discussions on adopting a long-term bridge safety strategy. I challenged those present to think strategically and look ahead 30 years and ask serious questions such as:

- What will the demands on railroad bridges be?
- Can the industry generate the revenue needed to maintain and replace aging and deteriorating bridges?

- Will there be enough of the right kind of personnel and equipment available to adequately address future bridge maintenance and inspection needs? Are there enough now?
- Are you investing in the right kind of research and technology to help identify potential problems in existing bridges?
- Can the industry utilize advanced engineering solutions when a serious bridge problem is identified?
- How can FRA best serve the public interest to protect against railroad bridge failures? and
- What role should the US DOT play in avoiding any potential future rail transportation crisis?

It is my hope that working together, we can answer to those questions and move forward with the work that needs to be done.

Technology—Advancement and Adoption

While bridge safety is one of my highest priorities, we are also seeking to improve railroad safety by fostering new technologies. I believe that using technology to improve safety is justification enough to do so.

As demand for rail service continues to grow, railroads will need to rely more heavily on technology to move more coal, intermodal shipments and other goods, faster, more efficiently, and safely. The role of FRA in all of this is to sponsor promising research and development projects to advance technology development on everything from detecting microscopic cracks in joint bars, to making hazmat tank cars more crashworthy and puncture resistant.

We can also revise federal rules to encourage and facilitate more rapid technology deployment like the exciting work that is being done now with Positive Train Control. The BNSF Railway is beginning to roll out its Electronic Train Management System or ETMS, on its network-- and Union Pacific is about to start its own pilot program in the field as a direct result of FRA revising federal regulations on processor based train control systems a couple of years ago.

And just last week, FRA issued a proposed rule intended to help railroads and shippers adopt Electronically Controlled Pneumatic Brake systems. ECP technology provides vastly improved train handling and shorter stopping distances. We believe that derailments and some collisions will be averted entirely.

Our proposal allows an ECP-equipped train to travel up to 3,500 miles—more than double the current maximum distance- without a need to stop for a routine brake test because the technology performs continuous automated self diagnostic maintenance checks that can alert an engineer of potential problems.

In practice, ECP brakes will allow an intermodal train leaving Los Angeles for Chicago to travel the same distance in less time, using less fuel, with lower diesel emissions. Similarly, ECP technology will allow unit coal trains originating in the west, to make deliveries more quickly to utilities and power plants in the south and the east. In fact, under a waiver request approved earlier this year, Norfolk Southern intends to operate its first ECP-equipped coal train in revenue service later this month near Pittsburgh. I am very excited that ECP is finally beginning to

become a reality. The safety benefits are obvious and FRA believes it makes good business sense as well.

Developing new technology is important, but making better and more use of what currently exists is worthwhile too. For example, FRA has been a longtime proponent of wayside detectors as a means of leveraging technology to provide instant field-base information about your rolling stock.

If the incoming data is handled correctly, wayside detectors are an excellent, efficient, and effective way to manage safety risks and prevent accidents. We believe they should be installed in more locations and the data collected by them integrated for improved analysis.

I truly believe that technology advancements such as PTC and ECP are the leading edge of what can be a new era of rail safety, but only if the rail industry fully embraces and adopts them.

Railroad Accountability

Finally, in order to enhance railroad accountability for their own safety, FRA is pursuing proven safety risk reduction programs to supplement our current behavior-based and design-specification safety approaches. A safety risk reduction program emphasizes investing up front in safety in order to 'do it right the first time' instead of being forced to correct some non-compliant situation with a fixed standard only at the time it arises as a problem.

For example, our Close Call Confidential Reporting System pilot project allows rail workers to anonymously report incidents that did not result in an accident, but could have. We believe this project will lead to the development of plans to eliminate or reduce the chance for workers to make common human errors or mistakes that can lead to accidents.

FRA also has developed a Collision Hazard Analysis guidebook for use by the commuter railroads to identify potential hazards along their operating corridors and to create meaningful and systematic plans to mitigate those hazards. We believe that freight railroads could benefit from a similar risk reduction approach that focuses on eliminating or reducing processes or systemic issues that cause or too readily permit accidents, injuries and fatalities to occur.

For example, a traditional approach would be to spend time and resources trying to locate and repair cracks in joint bars. A risk reduction approach looks to determine whether a joint bar should be used in the first place and at the process for eliminating them in order to reduce the opportunity for a joint bar to crack and cause a preventable train accident.

And as we move forward, railroads will increasingly be held more and more accountable for having and implementing a bridge safety management program. As I said before, the public and policymakers will demand some method of verifying the safety of railroad bridges. Leadership on this issue can come from within the industry or it can be imposed by others. I am looking to meeting with AREMA and its members to find a way to do the right thing by doing what needs to be done.

I want to take a moment to congratulate General Timmons and the American Short Line and Regional Railroad Association for their leadership on addressing these issues within the Short Line community. I look forward to hearing the results of their bridge safety taskforce, and I hope other railroads follow their lead on taking this issue seriously.

Conclusion

I will end with a reminder that the key safety issues we are dealing with today are very much the same issues we have been facing for years. They are what I refer to s the Four T's: track, time on duty, technology, and trust, but verify.

- If you don't maintain your track, trouble is sure to arise.
- If you don't appropriately manage time on duty issues, train crew fatigue becomes a serious concern.
- If you don't advance and adopt technology, safety improvements are unrealized.
- And, while the FRA believes that the rail industry is complying with regulations and following best practices, we must increasingly focus our time and attention to activities that verify that you are, in fact, doing what you should be doing.

Frankly, that's as it should be as FRA represents the interests of the public who demand that railroads operate and maintain safe rail networks. I believe AREMA shares that attitude and I support your continued efforts to make it a reality.

Thank you. It was a pleasure to speak with you today.

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